

Committee on Resources

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Testimony

Before the Committee on Resources

United States House of Representatives

Hearing on S.212

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First, I would like to thank the distinguished members of this Subcommittee for allowing me the opportunity to provide you with information, and offer another perspective on the potential implications of S. 212.

My name is Irene Favila, and I am from Plainview, Texas. Plainview is a small city situated in the Texas Panhandle – a region that depends heavily on water available through the Ogallala formation within the High Plains Aquifer. Crop production in the region, which is dominated by cotton and grain commodities, requires significant irrigation to meet watering demand. It is estimated that 95 percent of all crop land in the Panhandle is irrigated with water obtained through the Aquifer.

I am a workforce development coordinator for Motivation Education & Training, Inc. or “MET” – which is a community-based organization that helps displaced farmworkers find jobs outside of agriculture, as well as assisting in the stabilization of agricultural employment for underemployed workers and their families. During my 28-years with MET, I have witnessed some rather profound changes in both the agricultural economy and the social environment in our local area, and I have come to better understand the delicate balance between the prevailing forces that fuel agricultural production, and the varied interests that have a stake in this diverse and important industry. For the past eleven and a half years, I have been honored to serve on the Plainview City Council, and I consider it both a privilege and obligation to help improve the quality of life in my hometown and the surrounding area.

It would be difficult to live in the High Plains and not appreciate the importance of agriculture, but it is fairly easy to look at the broader landscape and not see some of the finer details. The migrant and seasonal farmworkers whom I serve are among the poorest working families in the nation, and their struggle to survive economically is a contest that would be unimaginable for most Americans. With average household incomes around \$7,600 per year, and an average household size of 3.8, Texas farmworkers are often faced with unfair tradeoffs and extremely hard choices. During 2001, our clients were only able to find farm employment for an average of 83 days. The need for income is so desperate that the mere promise of a job is sufficient to force whole families to migrate hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles. Natural forces, and increasingly global economic realities, impact the ability of farmworkers to find employment throughout the migrant stream, and workers and their families have endured a steady erosion of jobs and income over the last several decades. In Plainview alone, where once around 30 packing sheds supported a vibrant produce industry, none exist today.

The relationship between agricultural producers and the workers on whose behalf I am here today, is often portrayed as an uneasy coexistence between “us” and “them.” However, the reality of the situation is that the economic destinies of both parties are intertwined, bound by a common interest in the viability of crop and animal production, and vulnerable to many of the same natural and economic variables. While growers get the lion’s share of attention during lean production periods, for every farmer that faces a crop failure or other disaster, there are untold numbers of farmworkers whose losses are every bit as compelling and likely

more economically devastating.

I believe that my experience working with the agricultural labor force, my knowledge of the employment situation in the region, and my familiarity with the agricultural industry in general, enable me to speak knowledgeably about the potential impact of the legislation before the Subcommittee. Additionally, my public policy work as an elected official, as well as that accomplished through volunteer efforts, has provided me a greater understanding of how governmental initiatives impact the local and regional environments.

My chief concern with S. 212 is the proposed federal monitoring of the High Plains Aquifer, and its potential for increased regulation and restrictions that could adversely impact the already bleak employment prospects for migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Although the bill does not explicitly mention regulations, one must question the purpose of a new federal monitoring program when there are already state and local laws on the books for mapping the Aquifer. One must also question the need and nature of a federally-led monitoring program and what federal strings may eventually be attached to Aquifer use. Should this legislation be enacted, cutbacks in production and crop losses due to insufficient water availability, are legitimate concerns for growers and workers alike. We understand the necessity of better utilization, but we also believe that collective local engagement is the best means of addressing this crucial component of natural resource management. Texas is already leading the conservation movement to secure sufficient resources for future generations.

Secondary concerns with respect to this legislation, are that it will further constrain the targeting of scarce federal resources for other potentially more advantageous initiatives, as well as the possibility that implementation of this program will discourage precisely the type of local planning and coordination that is truly necessary for meaningful and sustainable community-driven action. S. 212 appears to duplicate existing programs, and the objectives of the legislation could be better met through improved coordination.

I must also question the need for creating a new \$90 million program that will compete with ongoing domestic needs in our communities.

The most important part of my job is helping workers who have been displaced from agriculture prepare for and secure jobs in other industries. The difficulty in rural areas such as Plainview, is that the entire economy is influenced by the performance of the farm and ranch sectors. While there may be considerable disagreement about the most effective means of managing natural resources, it would seem to make sense in this case, that we should avoid at all cost hurting the very people who depend on the water held in the High Plains Aquifer. I believe, especially in light of current economic realities, that we should at least strive to do no harm with respect to current jobs held by American workers, particularly those individuals who struggle at the bottom of the economic ladder, such as migrant and seasonal farmworkers. I would respectfully offer my hope that in trying to promote the public interest, that we do not impose unintended consequences on those with little ability to effectively pay the resultant economic and social costs. May God Bless You All.

Thank you again for your consideration.